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SUBJECT: THAILAND: NEW SURVEY POINTS TO STRENGTH OF THAI
DEMOCRACY

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ERIC G. JOHN, REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) On September 16, the Asia Foundation released the results of a new public opinion survey on Constitutional Reform and Democracy in Thailand. The Ambassador met with the Asia Foundation's leadership on September 17 to discuss the survey's findings, which among other things, revealed a deeply rooted support for and understanding of democracy in Thailand. The survey also pointed to a near uniformity of opinion on nearly all the major issues that transcended gender, political affiliation, and geography, a somewhat surprising finding given widespread preconceptions about dangerous political cleavages in Thailand. At the same time, the data also painted a picture of a populace with serious reservations about the integrity of the electoral process and a strong desire to root out corruption and judicial impunity. In discussing ongoing efforts to address these challenges, the Asia Foundation team highlighted its decentralization efforts.

2. (C) Comment: We were struck by the fact that the results of the survey appear to fly in the face of conventional wisdom about deeply seeded political rifts in Thailand. In fact, the survey seems to suggest just the opposite: most Thai apparently fall somewhere in the middle on most of the key issues of critical importance to a healthy democracy, not aligned with either the "red" or "yellow" extremes. Moreover, 95 percent of Thai citizens view democracy as the best form of government to move the country forward and have strong opinions about how to do so. What that also reveals, however, though the survey does not tease this out in detail, is that there is a healthy ongoing internal debate about what constitutes democracy in Thailand. Over the past several years, the reds have emphasized elections above all else, whereas the yellows stress transparency, accountability, and good governance. Clearly, Thailand needs both, not an either/or choice.

3. (C) Comment, cont: While the survey also underscored the importance of addressing Thailand's underlying structural

problems -- most critically corruption and a culture of impunity among the elite -- the survey would suggest there is room for optimism. In fact, to the extent anything positive can be said about the past three years of political squabbling and deadlock, it would appear to be the fact that this period has heightened political awareness and dramatically expanded the number of Thai who are engaged in the political process and understand its importance. That deepening of Thai participatory democracy does not grab headlines, but it is an important factor to understand the ongoing transformation of the Thai body politic in what is clearly an era of transition. End Summary and Comment.

THE SURVEY - SOME ENCOURAGING NEWS FOR ABHISIT

13. (SBU) On September 16, the Asia Foundation released the results of its newest survey: "Constitutional Reform and Democracy in Thailand: A National Survey of the Thai people."

The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews with a random, representative sampling of 1500 voters from 26 provinces nationwide between June 13 and July 5 of this year (Note: The sample area did not include the three southernmost provinces due to security concerns. End Note.) The survey sought to assess the process of democratization in Thailand, as well as to measure Thai voters' knowledge of and attitudes towards democracy and democratic institutions.

14. (SBU) The survey results included some potentially encouraging news for Prime Minister Abhisit's government. Despite the fact that two-thirds of respondents (67%) felt that their personal economic circumstances had deteriorated over the course of the last two years, a small majority (53%) felt satisfied with the job the government is doing.

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STRENGTH OF DEMOCRACY - THAIS GET IT

15. (SBU) The survey revealed overwhelming support for democracy as the best possible form of government (95%). In fact, according to the Asia Foundation, a larger percentage of voters were able to define specific characteristics of a democracy (91%) than in any other similar survey ever conducted by the Asia Foundation in Southeast Asia. This understanding appears to be deep and sophisticated as well, as nearly half (48%) described democracy in terms of rights or freedoms, while more than a third (36%) associated democracy with participation, elections and majority rule. Only a third of respondents (33%) expressed any support for authoritarianism.

16. (SBU) The sophisticated understanding of democracy translated into support for democratic values as well, in that 80 percent of respondents said that people should be free to express their political opinions. Similarly, 79 percent of the Thai voters said that meetings involving political parties with which they did not agree should nevertheless be allowed to take place in their neighborhood. Only six percent of respondents said that affiliating with an unpopular political party would be sufficient grounds to end a friendship.

17. (SBU) Thai voters also made it clear in the survey that they felt their interests were better expressed through directly elected representatives than through political appointees. For example, only a quarter of Thai (25%) supported the shift from a fully directly elected Senate to the partially directly elected Senate prescribed by the 2007 Constitution. Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) rejected the notion that the number of directly elected MPs should be reduced in favor of more appointed MPs.

18. (SBU) Turning to the ongoing Constitutional reform debate,

two-thirds of respondents (67%) said any amendments should be drafted via a participatory process involving ordinary citizens, while only ten percent said such amendments should be drafted by Parliamentarians alone. Most significantly, an overwhelming majority (84%) believed that a new or revised constitution should be ratified through a referendum.

CULTURE OF IMPUNITY - DON'T LIKE IT

¶9. (SBU) The survey revealed a strong distaste for the culture of impunity that pervades the Thai judicial system and the political elite. Only one-fifth of respondents (21%) supported pardons for any politicians convicted of a crime. This sentiment also seemed to apply to a lesser extent to the perpetrators of the 2007 coup. More than half of all those sampled (57%) said they thought the pardon for the coup-makers should be revoked. Interestingly, and perhaps counter-intuitively for those who believe the Democrats were passive supporters of the coup, southern respondents were less willing to pardon the coup makers than respondents in any other region (the coalition leader Democrats have a near monopoly on representing the south outside the three southernmost provinces).

INCREASED POLITICAL INTEREST BY THAI CITIZENS

¶10. (C) On September 17, the Ambassador called on Asia Foundation Director James Klein to discuss the results of the survey. The Ambassador noted that the survey results suggested that, rather than facilitating the collapse of democracy in Thailand, the last three years of political combat had instead apparently enhanced the average Thai's awareness of political issues. Survey coordinator Tim Meisberger agreed, pointing out that 83 percent of respondents said their interest in politics had grown or

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stayed the same over the past three years, while only 17 percent claimed it had decreased. Meisberger concluded that the past three years of political turmoil might be viewed -- in the not too distant future -- as a watershed moment in terms of increasing interest and activism in the political process. Director Klein concurred, adding that the Thai were obviously paying very close attention to politics.

SILENT MAJORITY?

¶11. (C) Turning to perceptions about the deep cleavages in the Thai body politic, the Ambassador noted that the political conversation was too often framed strictly in terms of People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) yellow-shirt supporters on one side of the spectrum, pitted against United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) red-shirt supporters on the other. Meisberger agreed, and pointed out that data from the survey clearly indicated that the vast majority of the Thai people actually fell in the middle of those two extremes, and were far less ideological than one would expect. According to Meisberger, this "silent majority" was way ahead of the politicians and would begin dragging the parties along.

ONGOING CONCERNS: ELECTIONS, CORRUPTION

¶12. (C) Director Klein underscored the fact that the survey also revealed serious questions and concerns about democracy in Thailand. Perhaps most critically, nearly half of all respondents (47%) said that they did not believe the next election -- whenever it may be held -- would be free and fair, an alarming statistic with problematic implications. Should the government dissolve and call elections for tomorrow, for example, the survey results suggest half of all Thai may consider the results fraudulent, irrespective of the

outcome.

¶13. (C) Turning to another key concern identified in the survey, the Ambassador highlighted the fact that while 95 percent of respondents identified corruption as a major problem, only seven percent of respondents who believed the country was headed in the wrong direction said it was primarily because of corruption. When the Ambassador asked whether this could be explained by a collective belief that tackling corruption would be a futile undertaking relative to other, more manageable concerns, Meisburger confirmed that that was the case. According to Meisburger, most of the Thai voters failed to list corruption as a primary problem because they have thrown up their hands and see no way out of the corruption morass.

DECENTRALIZATION AS A WAY FORWARD

¶14. (C) Director Klein argued that the survey results validated the Asia Foundation's belief that focusing on decentralization represented the best strategy for moving the country forward. The survey revealed a groundswell of support for decentralization across the country. By continuing to develop projects that supported decentralization efforts, the Asia Foundation believed it could help make an immediate impact by making local authorities more accountable.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador agreed with Klein's assessment and noted that, based on his many experiences with non-elected Governors throughout the country, it was obvious that they lacked the skills and desire to help their non-voting constituents. Making Governors directly accountable would change this dynamic overnight, as Governors who were not responsive or lacked political acumen would simply lose their jobs. Electing them directly would also have the added benefit of putting in place a "minor league farm system" to develop the country's next generation of leadership. Presently, there really were too few avenues to develop

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future leaders outside of the military.
JOHN